

‘SAAVOD’: Continuity of a Tribal Agrarian Tradition in Goa

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Abstract: Tribal hamlets in a few villages of south Goa follow a quite old and distinct traditional system of cultivation called as ‘saavod’. ‘Saavod’ is a communitarian and hereditary cultivation practiced by the Velip tribes in the villages of Gaondongrim and Khotigao in the taluka of Canacona in Goa. The system served as the backbone of tribal economy in the past and is manifesting phenomenal changes in the present day society of the Velips. The present study looks at some of traditional premises on which the system is structured and in turn looks into some of the modern changes creeping into it. The Velips have increasingly shifted from subsistence farming to mechanised farming. While the traditional crops are gradually losing importance, the impetus to cash crops is showing an upward trend among them. The participatory role too seems to suggest a general decline in the female workforce and a growing inclination among the elderly. The welfare means extended to the Velips have proved beneficial in the sustenance of the saavod. Given the varying nature of the system, it is significant and noteworthy to understand how it serves as a solidarity model across the different tribal hamlets spread the villages of Canacona.

I. INTRODUCTION

The whole of tribal India is at the present moment going through a stage of transition. This dynamism has led none of the tribal groups today to correspond to the ideal type of a primitive society of the previous eras. Anthropologists primarily attribute change experienced by tribal communities due to the relative opening of hill and forest area and also due to the process of sanskritisation (Singh, 2008). Undoubtedly, it can be said that the tribes of Goa too are not an exception to the above dynamics as their livelihood systems are undergoing changes. The study of tribal dynamics therefore, deserves special consideration as the tribal social worlds are being transformed due to the process of development.

The influx of the modern processes of change, especially in the post-independence period, has brought about a major transformation in the livelihood system of the tribal populations. They are now becoming more open ended and are readily welcoming change in the name of ‘development’. The once isolated tribal habitats are getting transformed and the concomitant primitive appearing traditional standards of tribal life are thereby weakening. No doubt, the way of life and livelihood activities of tribes in Goa has been altered to a great extent. This is equally true of the Velips living in the distant and forested areas in the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao in the taluka of Canacona. The present paper attempts to study the continuity of an age-old economic system of *saavod* among the Velips, one of the Scheduled Tribes in the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao in the taluka of Canacona in south Goa.

Tribes and the Goan society

Tribes constitute an important social component of the State of Goa. There is an uneven dispersal of tribal population across the villages and towns in the State of Goa. In many talukas and in the different villages we come across tribal people living amidst the non-tribal population. However, in a very few cases such as the villages in the taluka of Canacona, Quepem and Sanguem one finds hamlets exclusively inhabited by the tribes. Gawda, Velip and the Kunbi are the Scheduled Tribes of Goa. One may observe that, despite the fact that the Scheduled Tribe communities of the Gawda, Velip and the Kunbi have their distinct identities, they tend to reflect homogeneity in terms of their physical appearance and socio cultural practices. In other words, they share a common ethnic background.

Scheduled Tribes of Goa do not belong to a common religion: there are Hindu as well as Catholic Scheduled Tribes. During the pre-Portuguese period, these communities were “Backward Hindus”. However, during the Portuguese colonial rule in Goa, some sections of the tribal population in the old conquests belonging to the Gawda community were converted to Christianity and hence a sub group called as Catholic Gawda came into existence. A section of these catholic Gawda reverted to Hindus in the year 1928, thus forming a third group referred as Nav-Hindu Gawda. The Gawdas mainly prevail in the old conquests, i.e. in the talukas of Bardez, Tiswadi, Salcete and Mormugao. The Velips reside in the taluka of Quepem, Sanguem and Canacona.

The field and methodology

Every tribal settlement in the hamlets of these villages has peculiar social rules, customs, beliefs, and a way of life binding on all the members of the tribal society. The villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao have a predominant Scheduled Tribe population belonging to the Velips. Keeping in view the distinct nature of each

settlement the researcher decided to study the tribal hamlets in the villages of Gaondongrem and Cotigao as the universe of study.

The present study is guided by ethnographic field research orientation. The ethnographic dimension which is commonly used in anthropological studies serves to build an epistemological understanding of actual livelihood experiences of the community in the field of study. Johnson (as cited in Misra, 2009) aptly defines ethnography as "... a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do." Such an orientation has helped to develop a qualitative understanding of tribal life revolving around the *saavod* in natural social settings. It also facilitates to explore and explain the traditional and the modern facets of the system.

To substantiate the arguments an ethnographic guide was designed for the elderly people of the Velip community. Interviews with the elderly tribal persons gave valuable insights in knowing the overall transitory nature of the tribal society. Alongside the elderly experience, the qualitative narratives of the social and religious heads of the community revealed the traditional premises on which agrarian practices were undertaken.

Knowing the 'saavod'

The hamlets of Kinalkatta and Bharsa follow a quite old and unique traditional system of cultivation called as '*saavod*'. Under this system, a group of families from the two hamlets collectively participate in cultivation on a common land (plot). The name *saavod*, probably must have found its derivation from the location where the cultivation is carried namely, Saavri. Saavri is located at distance of two kilometres away from the hamlet of Bharsa and three kilometres from Kinalkatta in a semi hilly like area. There are altogether thirty-four families participating in the *saavod* cultivation from both the hamlets. The ownership rights of the families participating in the *saavod* have been passed over to them from their respective ancestors participating in it. Hence, not all families from the two hamlets have a stake in the *saavod*.

A traditional community enterprise

The ancestors in the olden times took active part in the *saavod*. During the monsoon, the tribals grew paddy in their independent fields and alongside got involved in the practice of shifting cultivation. During the remaining part of the year, they remained without any much work. At this point of time, the Velips also did not witness cashew plantation in the area. The community therefore took to sugarcane as the only, and the chief crop to be cultivated by them in the *saavod*. The ancestors during the monsoon and post monsoon period could give additional attention to the sugarcane cultivation. As the system of *saavod* was communally owned, it did not compel any requirement on all individual members of the families to work for it. There was definite pattern of division of labour accepted by the families. In this, on one particular day (for 24 hours) any one member of the family was required to provide his/her service to the *saavod*. The service generally involved taking care of the cultivation and supervising it during the day and especially at night from the fear of wild animals. On any given day there were at least two persons managing the *saavod*. It is learnt that every family receives a turn of its participation in the *saavod* once in seventeen days. Any one member from the family visited the site. Generally, the elderly male members took part in the *saavod*, women rarely participated. The ancestors enjoyed participating in the *saavod* as most of the time they were at leisure. The *saavod* also gave an opportunity for the people to come together and share their life stories.

Some transitional aspects

The institution of *saavod* gradually underwent changes in practice overtime. The land at Saavri faced water problems during the late winter and summer season, which brought down the productivity of sugarcane. Still more pathetic was the scarcity of rainfall. The cultivation of sugarcane was more favoured by the community in olden times for several reasons. The use of sugarcane was not meant for any commercial purposes but to meet their subsistence. Product such as jaggery made from the juice of sugarcane was largely used to prepare sweet dishes. Literally, the celebration of all *porobs* (festivals) among the Velips was marked with the preparation of sweet meals. The regular diet was also given to items prepared from jaggery. In modern times however, the entry of new food items in the dietary list has brought a lot of disfavour to the traditional meals particularly prepared from jaggery. The youth are increasingly fascinated to the nearby town culture, which offer modern delicacies. Also with the demand for cash crops, they eventually gave up the production of sugarcane.

During the course of the study, the researcher came across a set of traditional wooden heavy logs excavated from a well nearby the fields at Bharsa. The elders reported that these logs were lying immersed in the well and used by their ancestors for crushing and extracting juice from sugarcane for preparing jaggery. They estimated these logs to be older by more than two hundred years. The excavation of these logs establishes the very fact of the popularity of sugarcane plantation among the primitive tribal people.

Due to paucity of water for some time, the land remained uncultivated. However, it is in the last fifteen years the pattern of collective cultivation has taken a different form. Young educated Velip men have begun showing interest in the *saavod*, by seeking direction, support and guidance from officials of government departments such as irrigation, public works department and the department of agriculture and Indian Council of

Agricultural Research (ICAR). The intervention of various programmes of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research programmes is the major reason for the flourishing of *saavod* cultivation in recent times. Improved irrigation techniques, expansion of the water base, digging of additional wells, provision of free high yielding variety seeds, plants and fertilisers, impartment of scientific training have fundamentally added more value to the *saavod*. With the availability of modern high yielding hybrid seeds and the inclination of the families to market, the produce has brought about a radical change in the *saavod*. The major boost to the cultivation was received from Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) funds. The tribals are now entitled for free supply of seeds, plants, fertilizers, and modern tools required for farming under the TSP funds.

Various schemes are rooted through the department of agriculture. The tribal families under the Tribal Sub Plan are making optimum use of extension of government benefits. Profit and market oriented crops such as coconut, turmeric, cashew, banana, jackfruit, pineapple and mangoes are grown at this communitarian plot. To enhance production the tribal families are also given adequate training and orientation by experts in the field by organising camps and workshops.

As the cultivation is undertaken jointly the produce too is collectively owned by the families. With an increase in the production, they are able to meet the needs of their families as well as the market. Hence, of late the families have developed an inclination to sell their produce in the nearby taluka market. Crops such as banana and coconut are a regular source of income to the families.

Reconstructing solidarity

The *saavod* is a perfect model of communitarian and a collective distribution of labour. Howsoever, the modern ways may be appealing to the tribal society of the Velips, but the *saavod* keeps the group united through the division of labour shared by the members of the community. In this case, the Durkheimian concept of mechanical solidarity is found to be apt, at least for the tribal social world in the form of *saavod*. Unlike modern occupations, which demand specialisation and reinforce a particular code of behaviour, the *saavod* provides the families with ample liberty for a substitution or exchange of labour between the members. The collective attitude of the members to execute work sets aside the constraint of self-centredness. Though, the hamlets of Bharsa and Kinalkatta are geographically separated from one another, the *saavod* symbolises a continuity of unity of an age old association between them. A similar pattern of *saavod* also exists in other tribal hamlets of Gaondongrem and Cotigao but on a lesser extent.

II. REFERENCES

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